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ABSTRACT

Children's knowledge of nursery rhymes can be their path to learning to read and to enjoy reading if handled properly by their teachers and parents. Each session with a child or group of children must be enjoyable, non-threatening, inspiring and challenging for the children. They should be able to feel that their parents and teachers are also enjoying the rhymes, not just helping them because they feel it is their duty to do so. The use of nursery rhymes as a pathway for children's learning to read might be the answer to the present concern, the use of whole word versus decoding skills in teaching children to read, for the use of rhyme provides for both. Furthermore, since children like rhymes, they discover from the onset that reading can provide much pleasure. The also learn that the help they get in decoding and the discoveries they themselves make add to their enjoyment of rhymes. (A list of 12 instructional implications is included.) (RS)

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Nursery Rhymes, a Pathway to Reading?

by Susan Partridge

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Nursery Rhymes, a Pathway to Reading?

Bryant, Bradley, MacLean and Crossland (1), from the University of Oxford, had already established that there is a strong link between children's early knowledge of nursery rhymes at 3;3 and their developing phonological skills over the next year and a quarter. Feeling that this suggested that knowledge of nursery rhymes might also affect children's reading, they then reported longitudinal data from 64 children, aged 3;4 to 6;3, in support of this hypothesis. They reported a strong relationship between early knowledge of nursery rhymes and success in reading and spelling over the next three years even after controlling differences in I.Q., social background and children's phonological skills at the beginning of the project were taken into account. This raised the question of HOW nursery rhymes have this effect. Their answer was that nursery rhymes enhance children's phonological sensitivity and that, in turn, helps them to read. They did further analyses to support the idea of "this pathway" from nursery rhymes to reading. They explain:

> Our evidence suggests that the pathway is through the child's growing sensitivity to the component sounds in words. There are two steps to our argument. First, the nursery rhyme scores (with one exception) also predict success in phonological tasks over two years or more and do so even after their initial levels of phonological sensitivity have been controlled. So knowledge of nursery rhymes may affect the development of phonological sensitivity. Of course, we need to know a great deal about the way in which children acquire this knowledge. Trevarthen's work suggests that it may start early, and the prosodic cues and rhythm in mothers' speech to their babies may play an important part (Trevarthen and Marwick 1986). This work also suggests that nursery rhymes are an ingredient of mother-infant "dialogues" and thus are a

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> part of intersubjective routines which may play a significant role in language acquisition.
>
> Secondly, the relation between nursery rhymes and reading and spelling disappears when subsequent rhyme scores which predict reading and spelling very well, are entered in the equation. So it is possible that nursery rhymes enhance children's sensitivity to rhyme and this in turn helps them to learn to read.
>
> Much of the same argument can be made about phoneme detection and reading. The relation between nursery rhymes and reading disappears when phoneme detection scores are entered.
>
> The rhyme detection measures account for the connection between nursery rhymes and spelling but the phoneme measures do not. Thus rhymes are an essential ingredient of the connection between nursery rhymes and spelling. In rhyme the phonological unit is grosser and less specific than it is in phoneme detection tasks. But we also have evidence that children with reading problems make better progress in spelling (though not in reading) if they can rhyme (Bradley and Bryant 1978).

The authors suggest that a child who knows that the words, light, fight and sight, rhyme "is in a better position to learn about the sound usually associated with 'ight', the spelling pattern which these words have in common."

Though convinced that familiarity with nursery rhymes "enhances children's sensitivity to the component sounds in their language and that this in turn affects their progress in reading and spelling; they felt that more evidence was needed to determine if more experience with nursery rhymes would make children more successful in phonological tasks. Bryant, MacLean, Bradley and Crossland (2) undertook a study in which three views of the relation between various forms of phonological awareness (the detection of rhyme, alliteration and phonemes) and children's reading were tested. The three views follow:

1. That the experience of learning to read leads to phoneme awareness and that neither of these is connected to awareness of rhyme.
2. That sensitivity to rhyme leads to awareness of phonemes, which in turn affects reading.
3. That rhyme makes a direct contribution to reading that is independent of the connection between reading and phoneme awareness.

Their longitudinal study which monitored the phonological awareness and progress of 65 children aged 4;7 to 6;7, produced strong support for views 2 and 3 and none for the first view. They concluded:

> Our study confirms the existence of a strong relation between children's phonological skills and reading. It also shows that rhyme and alliteration contribute to reading in at least two ways: Sensitivity to rhyme and alliteration are precursors of phoneme detection, which, in turn plays a considerable role in learning to read. Sensitivity to rhyme also makes a direct contribution to reading, probably by helping children to group words with common spelling patterns. The study demonstrates the importance of early rhyming skills.

The findings of the Oxford scholars might be an answer to today's concern about whole language versus phoneme awareness in teaching the young children to read, as rhymes provide for the use of both.

Most children like rhymes; they sing them, chant them, make rhymes of their own, etc. As the Oxford scholars put it, "Nursery rhymes are an almost universal part of young English-speaking children's lives."

Parents' reading of nursery rhymes and the ensuing parent-child dialogues contribute to the child's acquisition of language

which is a help in learning to read. Modern technology provides help for children and parents who are learning English as a second language. They can, for example, be supplied with tapes, and they, in turn, can contribute a selection of a favorite childhood story or rhyme from their native land.

The various ways of presenting rhymes can make them appeal to a wider audience and also stimulate and develop creativity on the part of the children.

It is believed that there is, or can be (improvised, adapted or found in reputable collections), a rhyme for every skill in the reading hierarchy. A few examples follow: For children who find it extremely difficult to distinguish between left and right, a very interesting and helpful rhyme, written by Mary Ann Hoberman (7), might contribute to their learning to do so:

Windshield wipers wipe the windshield
Wipe the water from the pane
This way That way
This way That way
This way That way
In the rain.

The illustration accompanying the rhyme would appeal to many children, as a dog with long ears and big eyes is the driver of the car with its windshield wipers working.

Being able to relate to a rhyme and to understand vocabulary are aids in comprehension. The following rhyme (personally composed), is an example:

My courage is growing stronger,
This feeling I can vent:

The folks slept in the camper,
And I, outside in my tent. (a pup tent)
S.P.

The rhyme might well prompt a lively discussion about other acts of courage, as courage is sought by almost everyone. Understanding of the word, vent, can be discovered by the children through other words known to them; vents in the family car, floor vents, ceiling vents, etc.

In the matter of the mechanics of reading, the discovery of rhyming lines through thinking that is self-initiated or stimulated by the teacher, makes it easier for the children to identify words that rhyme but do not look alike -- the words, do and blue, in the rhyme below, for example:

My First Fish

I caught my first fish today,
It was hard to decide what to do --
To take him home or to let him stay
Back in the water so blue.

The fish looked at me,
And his look was such
That I knew right away
I'd go home with no catch.
S.P.

"The Huffin' Puffin' Muffin" (S.P.) provides the opportunity to help children understand figurative language, the omission of the "g" in "ing," and to enjoy contributing to something to which many can relate -- muffin', puffin', huffin', dunked, and thoroughly. Those who know the story, "The Three Little Pigs," can probably contribute a great deal. Contributing helps

children to acquire a facility with language which, in turn, is a help in learning to read.

Children seem to enjoy rhymes written by their teacher, and librarians are a great help in recommending those written by well-known authors. Some children, too, are inspired to write their own rhymes thus making reading and writing partners in literacy attainment.

C. Kirtley et al. (8) on recent evidence that children naturally divide syllables into the opening consonant or consonant cluster (the onset) and the rest of the syllable (the rhyme), thought it an explanation for the fact that preschool children are sensitive to rhyme, but often find tasks in which they have to isolate single phonemes extremely difficult. They reasoned, "Words which rhyme share a common rime and thus can be categorized on that speech unit. Single phonemes, on the other hand, may only be part of one of these speech units." This analysis accounted for their predictions which follow:

> 1. Young children, even children not yet able to read, should manage to categorize words on the basis of a single phoneme when the phoneme coincides with the word's onset ("cat," "cup") but not when it is only part of the rime ("cat," "pit").
> 2. They should find it easier to work out that two monosyllabic words have a common vowel which is not shared by another word when all three words end with the same consonant ("lip," "hop," "tip") but the odd word has a different rime than when the three words all start with the same consonant ("cap," "can," "cat") and thus all share the same onset. The hypothesis also suggests that children should be aware of single phonemes when these coincide with the onset before they learn to read. We tested these predictions in two studies of children aged 5, 6, and 7 years. The results clearly support our predictions.

It is believed that rhymes provide a sense of order and harmony of sound and that their rhythm and style make provision for children's prose reading. For example, in the story, "The Three Bears," which many children continue to enjoy, they can easily relate to the meaningful repetition, "Who's been sitting in my chair?" As a rule, each person is usually concerned with his/her own things first. In reading the question, emphasis seems to fall on the key words, "who's" and "my."

Rhymes provide many thought-provoking questions, and they stimulate the imagination and creativity; thus they are challenging, more enjoyable and more likely to help children to become readers and to enjoy and profit by it.

Because of the numerous advantages rhymes provide for teaching children to read, to enjoy doing so and to become lifetime readers, a warning presented by Emans (5) and credited to Holt, is felt worthy of consideration by teachers and parents. The warning follows: "We do things backwards. We think in terms of getting a skill first and then finding useful and interesting things to do with it. The sensible way, the best way, is to start with something worth doing, and then, moved by a strong desire to do it, get whatever skills are needed." It is felt that children's deep-seated interest in rhymes supports this reasoning.

The fondness of most children for nursery rhymes seems to support the notion that "the sensible way, the best way, is to start with something worth doing," as acquiring skills to do it

will be facilitated by the children's deep interest.

Among the many key people in making nursery rhymes "a pathway to reading" are the teacher, the parents, the librarian.

Murlee Hart (6) has made it clear that though some children can transfer their knowledge of rhyming words to decode unknown words, and do it on their own, others can not. She has advised, "In order to make the knowledge about rhyming words useful for improving reading skills, the teacher must relate the oral activity of rhyming to the visual activity of focusing the students' attention on that part of the word that is the rhyming part -- in other words, the phonogram." Making use of phonograms could, in many cases, make decoding quicker than using the phoneme-grapheme correspondence. In any case, the teacher's recognition of the differences in children should be given top priority.

The teacher's personality is another important consideration. Some teachers have a very engaging personality and can capture and hold the interest of children. They are sensitive to the needs of the different children, and they provide for these needs. Their ability to share, and to thoroughly enjoy things of interest to children are among other attributes.

There is considerable evidence supporting the contributions of parents in instilling in their children a love for reading and that those children who have enjoyed this advantage have done better than those denied it. In support of this evidence and in

the best interests of children, the involvement of ALL parents should be sought, and communication between parents and teachers should always be open.

School librarians are good allies in encouraging children to read and to enjoy doing so. They know books thoroughly and can respond intelligently to children's questions and comments about particular selections. Teachers, too, stand to profit by the able help of the librarians and, in the best interest of the children, they should enlist the aid of the librarian.

The librarian can be a great help to teachers in suggesting and supplying rhymes to accommodate the varied interests of children. In addition to well-known and "t ied and true" rhymes there are more-modern collections, and these might have more appeal to some of today's children.

Public libraries are another good source. Recently, the children's librarian in a large county library to which many, even those in rural areas, have access, was called and asked to name some more-modern books of rhymes which she has found very popular with the little children. She named several from the "Recommended Elementary School Library Collection" as well as a few others, and expressed a willingness to aid teachers, parents and children in making appropriate selections.

Interestingly enough, an article related to the contents of this paper, appeared in the very latest issue of The Reading Teacher. The article was entitled, "Poetry is Like Directions for Your Imagination." It was written by two first grade

teachers, Christine Duthie and Ellie Kubic Zimet (4) whose collaborative efforts were "directed toward creating an environment and program that is respectful, enjoyable, and challenging to every child."

They believed, "One of the major genres of language is often neglected in classroom literacy experiences (Denman, 1988)." They discovered that not only is it accessible to children; it also motivates them to read and write.

They found that in a whole language classroom there is constant interaction among all the members by "sharing, responding, and conferring."

They concluded, "Poetry enriched our language program and enabled the children and teachers to grow as readers and writers, enjoying each other along the way."

For those teachers interested, the authors provided valuable material -- a list of suggested poets for primary children, a table of daily minilession topics, a list of suggested poetry anthologies, etc. This would be a help to them if they wished to extend their "rhyme program" for some of the more-able children who might be interested in, and profit by, the experience.

Most teachers agree that some children are in need of behavior modification if they are to use their learning capabilities to the fullest. Rhymes offer "fringe benefits" in this respect. A collection of such rhymes from a variety of sources can be found in a book, by W. Coley (3), entitled I'm Mad at You. The titles of these rhymes reveal a use to which they

might be put without pointing a finger at the offender. A few titles follow:

"Katherine Tattles," by Leland Jacobs
"Ten Kinds," by Mary Mapes Dodge
"Cry-Baby," by Martin Gardner
"Magic Word," by Martin Gardner
"If I Had a Firecracker," by Shel Silverstein

Conclusions

It is concluded that little children's knowledge of nursery rhymes can be their path to learning to read and enjoy it if handled properly by their teachers and parents. Each session with a child or a group of children must be enjoyable, non-threatening, inspiring and challenging for the children. They should be able to feel that their parents and teachers are also enjoying the rhymes, not just helping them because they feel it is their duty to do so.

It is further concluded that the use of rhymes as a pathway for little children's learning to read might be the answer to the present concern, the use of whole word versus decoding skills in teaching children to read, for the use of rhyme provides for both. Furthermore, since children like rhymes, they discover from the onset that reading can provide much pleasure; it's not just sounding out words and doing page after page of decoding exercises. They learn, too, that the help they get in decoding and the discoveries they, themselves, make, add to their enjoyment of the rhymes.

Implications

1. It is believed that capitalizing on little children's deep-seated interest in nursery rhymes should be given serious consideration to their use in teaching the children to read.

2. Instruction should be enjoyable, stimulating and challenging to the children if individual needs and differences are recognized, respected and dealt with accordingly.

3. Some more-modern rhymes which parents and librarians have found well-liked by little children might well be added to the program, as using rhymes to which the children can better relate facilitates their reading and increases their enjoyment.

4. Taking advantage of the fact that children's enjoyment in reading rhymes can, and often does, lead to their writing some of their own should be given careful consideration.

5. Involvement of parents in their children's reading should be sought and encouraged.

6. Rhymes provide for teaching many skills needed for intelligent reading, among them, the decoding skills, vocabulary development, understanding figurative language, reasoning, etc.

7. Teachers using nursery rhymes as a pathway for little children to learn to read and to enjoy it, need to be special and specially trained. This must be communicated to those responsible for teacher training.

8. Teachers should keep abreast of current material, found in professional journals, on the use of nursery rhymes to teach little children to read, and they, too, should share their

"success stories" with others.

9. When appropriate, consideration of the "fringe benefits" of rhymes as described in this paper might be advantageous.

10. Reports that the use of nursery rhymes in teaching little children to read have resulted in improvement in their reading, spelling and writing (each of which reinforces the other) is felt worthy of consideration of their continued and wider use.

11. Consideration should be given to the many creative activities that can be stimulated by rhymes -- drawing, writing, singing, dancing, etc.

12. Consider the value of rhymes in the whole-language movement.

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